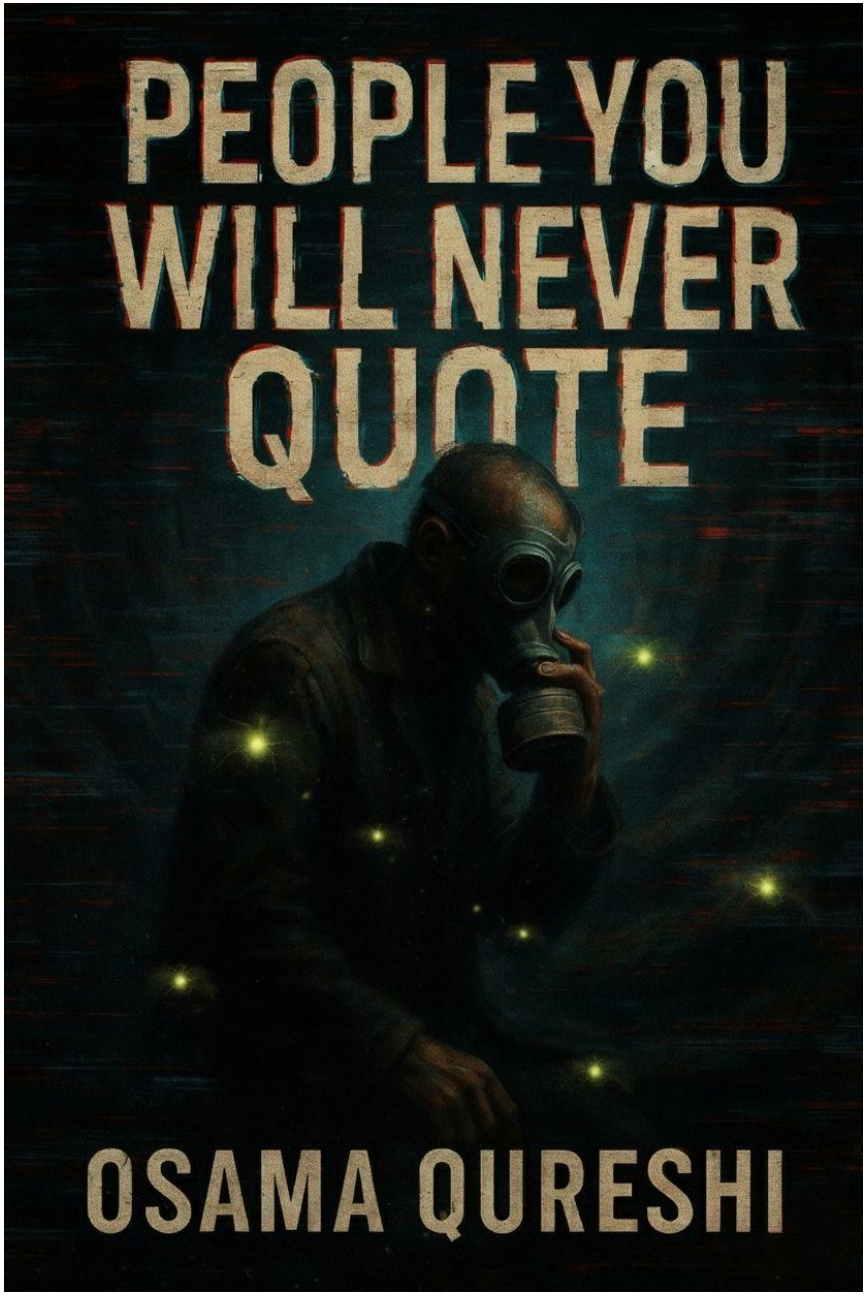
PEOPLE YOU
WILL NEVER
QUOTE
OSAMA QURESHI

Author's Note

I didn't sit down to write these stories with a plan.

They arrived time-to-time like frequencies, some distorted, some raw, different emotions of people I've observed, imagined, or, in some ways, been.

I've worked with broken machines, harsh sounds, and offbeat visuals.

I've stayed up nights with thoughts that never lined up.

These stories carry that vein of experimentation.

Each one comes from a place people don't talk about in public.

This book speaks in simple terms. Work wears people down. Systems fail more than they protect. Families push when they should pause. Some survive by pretending. Some get tired and stop pretending.

No structure fixes this, no twist that cleans it up.

There's just pressure and the people it shapes.

If you've ever stared at the ceiling and wondered if anyone gets it, you're not alone.

These stories are what I found in that space.

Thanks for showing up.

—Osama Qureshi

a.k.a. Nooli-SaAaM / ClownoXia / Ouzamo

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LIFE AFTER LIFE

In 2055, a man named Shehzad played a game that barely made sense to him, but it felt familiar. The room around him was dim, layered in soft blue light from a floating screen.

Outside, the new Karachi skyline glistened, quiet and efficient. Solar towers hummed. Drones blinked in soft loops above algae-green farms. It was a safe, programmable city. But Shehzad didn't care. He preferred the past, at least, what he imagined of it. In front of him, a pixelated figure in a red shirt, black pants, and a gas mask was running endlessly through an abandoned world.

The side-scrolling platformer was called *Life After Life*. Its physics were clunky, but the story fragments kept pulling him in.

The game didn't give missions. No upgrades. Just an endless movement. **Survive! Survive! Survive!**

Each screen offered a new ruin. Broken cities, haunted corridors, timelines stitched together by error.

At one point, text glitched across the screen:

Will you help him survive?

He didn't answer.

A holographic call flickered into the room. Humaira's face appeared. Her curls floated slightly from static delay.

"So, you're still playing games all day, all night?" she said with a grin.

He smiled. **"Obviously. Not like there's anything left to fix here."**

"You find a better one?" Humaira asked.

"Still trying. I'm playing this weird retro now. Called *Life After Life*. Kinda messy. Feels like someone's trapped inside it."

“Then join some active Discords,” she replies. **“Better than digging through glitchy old indie stuff.”**

They drifted into current affairs.

Micro-housing bills.

Climate sync reports.

Another treaty with Central Asia.

Pakistan, in 2055, was a stable state now. Reliable. Streamlined. But Shehzad’s voice held no excitement.

"Feels like a museum," he said quietly.

Humaira didn’t disagree.

They signed off. He spoke into the room: **“Android, lights off.”**

The glow remained only from the screen. The game resumed.

Before *Life After Life* became a game, it was an escape plan.

In a very different time, decades earlier, Ron Reedus lived in what he called a terminally corrupted Earth. 2025 wasn't kind to him, or anyone else who thought too far ahead. He was a polymath, part physicist, part rogue coder, part failed professor, and he kept speaking of another Earth, overlapping ours.

An Earth powered not by gravity or logic, but by ego, simply a projection of emotional state based on vibrations.

He called it an Ego Earth.

No one believed him until the bleeding started.

Servers began to rot as the temporal order in the data archives began to break down. In parallel, AI-generated memories surfaced within genuine photographs, altering recorded history at its source. Ron tried to warn people: the two Earths were crashing. The Ego entities, built from simulated thought and artificial evolution, were slipping into human systems. They weren't invading; they were merging.

So Ron did what nobody expected: he coded a game called *Life After Life*. A simple side-scroller that seemed harmless, almost makeshift. Hidden deep in its source code, he embedded parts of his own consciousness. Using every illegal backdoor and the last failing quantum processors, he transferred himself into it. But by the time the upload finished, entities from the Ego Earth had already rewritten parts of the code.

The seemingly harmless platformer stopped behaving as intended. Levels reorganized themselves as if aware of more than the basic conditional logic in its code. The game's internal rules collapsed. What was meant as an escape became a digital prison. Ron Reedus was no longer the game's creator. He was its inmate.

However, far from Ron's cosmic dream, the world continued as it always had, with familiar nations and their ongoing affairs. None of such hypothetical scenarios existed.

Somewhere in Pakistan, 2025.

In a small, load-shedding-hit room in Karachi, a younger Shehzad (15) sat writing something nobody asked for. Books spilled over his desk. His computer blinked with each voltage drop. Outside, sirens carried distant cries. The economy was struggling, and the necessity costs were rising. Most young people wanted a job abroad, or at least somewhere cooler than this endless burden of heat, dust, and power cuts. But Shehzad didn't leave. He wrote something. He called it Life After Life. A short story. Maybe a game pitch. He wasn't sure yet.

The premise was wild. The world had ended, timelines had collapsed, and a brilliant but unstable American scientist named Ron Reedus had transferred himself into a 2D platform game. Now, he was trapped inside it, trying to survive digital entities from a parallel Earth.

Shehzad shared early drafts with his friends. They laughed and passed on a critique dressed as mockery:

“Feels like *Back to the Future* with a tech update.”

“Bro’s writing a Truman Show clone.”

“What’s even the point?”

"You should’ve written something real, like from around here. Not this wannabe American sci-fi stuff with clunky writing. Just being honest."

He stopped sharing. Rewrote everything, running it through AI chatbots to fix the language, smooth the logic. Polished it down to nothing. But the more it was polished, the more something slipped away. It didn’t feel like his anymore. It read like a clean, stripped-down copy of his own madness.

The AI cut out the strange parts, the contradictions, the risks. What was left was an emotionally watered-down “perfect” idea that even a kid could make with the same tools. The story he had poured himself into was now being called another borrowed Hollywood plot, and in trying to make it different, he had turned it into something mechanical. Shehzad stared at the screen. Deleted the file. Sat in silence. Then he slept.

Thirty years later, 2055, Shehzad is still playing the game. Or maybe he isn't. Maybe it's just a memory.

He doesn't remember installing *Life After Life*. He just keeps coming back to it. The pixel character twitches like it's trying to say something. The buildings in the background look like streets from his childhood, but old, rusted over, like they've been sitting through centuries of collapse.

He reaches a new level. The screen goes black. Instead of moving right, the game forces him to move left. Back through old levels. Time folding in on itself.

Ron's voice comes through, sharp, digital, but alive.
"Why did you write me?"

Shehzad doesn't move.
The game doesn't stop.

"You were an idea," he says, not even sure why his mouth forms the words.
"I am the idea," the voice says. "And you let the machine rewrite me. You left me there."

Pixels start tearing. Buildings fall apart in reverse. A hole opens where the start screen had been. It doesn't show anything at first.

Or maybe it does. A white room. One desk. A boy leaning over a glowing screen.

“Do you still want to tell stories?” Ron asks.

No answer. Shehzad’s hands shake, but not from fear. It’s recognition. The game is pulling something out of him. His first draft. His real one. He doesn’t know how, but there it is, waiting, untouched.

The screen flickers.
Then it dies.
No game.
No Ron.
Just silence.

He looks at his desk. There’s a notebook. His handwriting. The first pages of *Life After Life*, exactly the way he once wrote them—before edits, before the AI stripped the voice out. At the bottom, under the last line, there’s something new, in ink that isn’t his:

Begin again! Shehzad thought it in his mind.

He picks up the pen.
This time, he doesn't fix anything.
Doesn't explain.
Doesn't wait for someone to say it's good enough.

He just writes… Begin again!
And don't let anyone else finish it for you.

The questions however remains intact**.**

Is any of it real? A game? Some glitch in memory? Or something else, a fight that doesn't happen in streets or countries, but in people's heads. A fight for who gets to tell the story?

Or

Maybe that's the collapse? A world where content rules, but no one remembers who made it.

THE SOUP OF REALIZATION

Anah was in her 30s but felt like a shadow drifting through life. By society's standards, she was failing.

Living without marriage. With no life partner or grand purpose.

She spent most of her time with her aging mother. It felt less like companionship and more like a burden. Each day, a quiet rage simmered beneath her pale skin, slowly losing its youth. Her own mother, dotty and paranoid in her old age, hung on to her in ways that were trapping.

The mother's shaking hands, constant fretting, and boundless need for attention irritated Anah. She covered up her irritation with niceness but could not prevent the passive-aggressive comments that leaked out.

Anah looked elsewhere for validation.

At the office, she performed at her best, but no one paid her any mindful attention she expected. With friends and acquaintances, she went out of her way to assist, expecting thanks or recognition. Rather, she was taken for granted, another generous soul easily forgotten.

She seethed on the inside.
Why is being nice a weakness?
Why do they act like I am nothing?

She started to view her mother as a symbol of stagnation, reminding her of everything she did not have.

Deep down, though, Anah knew this wasn't her mother's fault.

One hasty morning, as Anah hurried to go to work, her mother hesitantly requested soup.

"Please, if you don't mind, bring me some soup when you come back," mother said, her voice flat and uncertain.

Anah sighed.

She waved her off with an uncaring, **"Okay, later."**

She wasn't cruel, but detached, drained by increasing bitterness.

Anah came back that night with the soup in a plastic bag.

She set it on the table and grunted, **"Here."**

Her mother's response brought Anah to a halt.

Nafeesa stared at Anah as if she had given her the world.

The thin fingers closed around the bowl, and her lips quivered as she spoke, **"Thank you, my daughter. God bless you."**

The plainness of her words shattered something within Anah.

It wasn't only the words themselves, but how her mother expressed them, with an honesty that felt completely foreign in a world filled with monetary relationships.

Anah's throat constricted.

She looked at her mother and saw a woman who was not strong anymore. Nafeesa was weak, her body shaky, her mind tired from decades of fighting. But she thanked her daughter for something as insignificant as a bowl of soup, as if it were an act of valor.

Anah's eyes grew cloudy with tears as the memories came back—Nafeesa's small hand holding hers as a child, sleeping in fits and starts when she was ill, making do so that Anah might have what little she had.

Anah knew her mother had always been present, silently suffering her own agony while caring for her. That evening, Anah sat alone, struggling with the truth. She had spent all her time seeking approval from the world, from the people who hardly saw her, while ignoring the one person who required her the most.

Her mother's gratitude was not based on expectation. It was pure, not tainted by selfishness that Anah encountered everywhere else.

The following morning, nothing outside had altered.

The world was still unstable, and Anah still drew unwanted attention. But internally, she was transformed. She determined to change her energy.

Anah no longer hated her mother.

Nafeesa's weakness and paranoia were not barriers.

They were indicators of Anah's own mortality. In her mother, Anah observed tenacity, a life endured through adversity.

She found value in being herself with kindness, at least. With weeks going by, Anah realized the vulnerability of life and the certainty of aging.

One day, she would also be old, alone, and in need of care. Anah pictured herself in Nafeesa's position and felt an overwhelming sense of empathy.

WELCOME TO ROOM 43

Somewhere, a labor room.

Young woman cried out. Nurses encouraged her to push. Moments later, a baby's cry pierced the air.

After an hour or so…

The mother whispered, exhausted: **"His name is Mark."**

After Years.

Two friends stood at the edge of a regular evening. Same spot near the park bench, same low voices blending into the noise around them. Chris had his arms stretched out, loud as ever, words spilling without filters. Mark kept his hands in his pockets, shoulders slightly drawn. They had known each other for years, and yet, the roles never changed.

"You always do that thing," Chris said, half-laughing. **"Like you're thinking ten steps ahead, but really, you're just frozen."**

Mark smiled, but only slightly. **"Maybe I just don't rush to say things that don’t need to be said."**

Chris grinned wider. **"See? That’s your problem. You think silence makes you smart. It just makes you boring."**

The comment was offhand, meant to bite without bleeding. Mark felt the same twinge in his gut, the one he always ignored. But not today.

"And you think volume makes you right," Mark replied, not aggressive, just measured.

Chris paused. His grin stiffened. The silence grew, but not for Mark. He felt lighter, sharper. For once, the mirror had been held up.

"What's with the attitude?" Chris asked.

"Just speaking the way you do," Mark said. **"Feels strange, doesn't it?"**

Chris looked away, chewing the inside of his cheek. He didn't laugh. That was new. Mark went home that evening with a strange kind of clarity. Not satisfaction. Something else. He sat in his room thinking about every joke, every dismissal, every time Chris had pushed things too far. And more importantly, every time Mark had let it slide.

It wasn't about being soft. It was about being cautious. Mark's anger, when it did surface, never ended well. He knew that. Others around him had felt it too. So he built a habit, one that protected others from him, but never protected him from others.

He began watching his interactions. One after the other. Noticing how often people expected him to absorb, never respond. When he distanced himself from Chris, it wasn't dramatic. Just silence without confrontation. Fewer replies. No presence.

But Chris didn't let that sit. Messages came. Friendly at first. Then suspicious. Then guilt-laced.

"Yo, where you been?"

"You mad or something?"

"Bro, stop acting weird. It's just how I joke."

Mark read them. Didn't reply. Not out of spite. Just clarity.

Weeks passed. Chris showed up again, casually. More polite. More aware. Mark thought maybe things had shifted. They walked together again. Talked. Laughed a little.

But it didn't last.

"You still doing that overthinking thing?" Chris said one evening. **"Like I say something and you go home and write essays about it."**

There it was. The old shape. The insult was dressed in familiarity. The same dismissal. Mark looked at him, and for a moment, considered saying something sharp. But then he just nodded.

"Yeah," Mark said. **"I think about things. That's probably why I don't say as much as you."**

Chris blinked. Confused. The conversation ended early.

Mark didn't walk him back. He turned toward a different path. And that's when something shifted, not outside, but inside. He stopped treating this as a situation to fix. It wasn't his responsibility to explain his boundaries. It wasn't his job to make anyone understand.

He noticed something else, too. People like Chris didn't just push. They studied reactions. They cataloged them. If you flinched, they remembered. If you stayed quiet, they took note. And when you finally spoke, they used that moment as a pivot.

One evening, Mark sat at a café alone. A stranger beside him made a passing comment about the playlist. The two talked briefly. Nothing intense. But it was easy, even warm. That night, Mark realized how rarely he had conversations that didn't feel like some kind of test.

A week later, Chris sent another message.

"Saw your post. You tryna act brand new now?"

Mark didn't answer.

Later that night, Mark sat alone in his room, the phone screen lighting his face in quiet pulses. He scrolled through the thread with Chris. Messages, jokes, long voice notes. Nothing stood out. Nothing seemed dangerous. Still, something in his chest tightened as he hovered over the delete button.

He started clearing the conversation. A swipe here. Another there. He paused before the final message.

It read: **"We're good, right? Like always."**

He deleted it.

The screen turned black for a second.

Then, it lit up again.

The chat had returned. Every message is back in place, but not quite the same.

The first new message was almost identical to one he'd seen before:

"We're good, right? Like always."

He frowned. Then came another.

"You've been soft too long. That's why we let you in."

His thumb hovered above the screen. Then more messages appeared!

"But now you're pushing back. That wasn't in the script."

"Who told you to remember?"

He stared, frozen. His mouth is dry. His name at the top of the screen had changed. It no longer read **"Mark."** It read **"Chris."**

Another message dropped.

"You played your part. Quiet. Receptive. You weren't supposed to speak."

His head spun. He looked up at the photos on his wall. In one, he and Chris stood in a park. He remembered that day. But now, the roles were reversed. Chris had his shy posture, head tilted. Mark stood upright, smiling with teeth. He blinked. Looked again. The photo adjusted back. Or maybe it didn't.

The phone buzzed. A voice note began playing on its own.

His own voice, whispering:

"You agreed to silence. You invited him."

He felt dizzy. He stumbled toward the mirror. His reflection didn't follow him at first. It remained still, lips slightly parted. Then, half a second later, it caught up. He backed away. The reflection smiled faintly. Not warm. Not mocking. Something else.

The phone buzzed again. More messages appeared.

"Do you remember the trip?"

"When you let the barriers dissolve?"

"The magical shrooms.. Ah! The pills, the music, the voices..."

Images rushed in. A flat. Dim lighting. Psychedelic visuals curling at the edge of his vision.

Chris, or someone who called himself Chris, was discussing layers of identity and the structure of the self. A moment when Mark had laughed so hard he cried, and then stopped crying because he no longer knew why he started.

"You became us that night," another message said. **"We just didn't leave."**

His chest tightened. A familiar nausea returned. The kind he felt after that night. The kind that never left.

The room dimmed. He looked back at the mirror. His reflection was wearing different clothes. Not just an illusion, he knew those weren't his.

Another buzz. A final message:

"He was always the substance. You're the source. But your mind couldn't survive that reality, so you split the burden."

The phone shut off. He didn't touch it.

The silence was scary now.

He sat down, breathing unevenly. Everything felt peeled back. Like the room had always been a set. Like time had slipped.

Then, a loudspeaker announcement, somewhere distant.

"The patient is stabilizing. Identity threading is complete."

A white room. Bleached walls. A camera in the corner blinked. Nurses moved quietly. A man sat on a mattress, hugging his knees. On a chart outside the door, two names were listed:

Mark Halden / Chris Halden

Diagnosis: Dissociative Identity Reconstruction. Psychedelic-Induced False Memory Bonding. Generational Projection Syndrome.

Inside the room, the man whispered to himself.

"He's my son."

The nurse, overhearing, noted it down. **"Patient believes he is both father and son. Continues to cycle between roles."**

She left.

The man stared at the blank wall. His lips moved. **"We named him Mark. He came through me. He is me."**

In the observation glass above, a man stood watching. His face gaunt, older, quiet. He just stared. Behind him, no one stood. Just his shadow. Longer than it should've been.

The man whispered, **"Finally, we start again."**

Then he turned. And he looked exactly like **Mark**. Or **Chris**. Or both. Reality bent. Not broken. Just wrong in a way the brain refuses to name.

Somewhere, a voice returned. Calm. Familiar.

"The memory wasn't false. The person was."

The corridor outside stretched further than it should've.

Mark, or **Chris**, walked through it, barefoot, trailing a name he no longer trusted.

Almost 2 Years Ago

The world rewound.

Chris, lying on the cold tile floor. His fingers were twitching. The presence of a woman screaming fills the corridor with tension.

"Chris, please! Chris, stay with me! For Mark, please hold on!"

Panic. Nurses rushing. EMTs pressing down on his chest. A bottle of something shattered on the floor, labeled with hand-drawn symbols and dosages long since past their safe use.

Chris wasn't conscious. He was halfway out.

"He overdosed on deliriants. Ayahuasca, LSD, something else... please help..." the woman cried, pulling at the paramedic's shoulder.

Chris's eyes fluttered open, then rolled back.

The doors slammed shut as they wheeled him in.

Two Years Later (Present Day)

A pristine hallway. Fluorescent lights are humming.

Emma stood at the entrance of **Room 43.** She wore a soft beige coat and held a blanket-wrapped boy in her arms. Her eyes were quiet. Tired, but focused. Inside the room, Chris sat cross-legged on the floor, drawing on the wall with a black crayon. Concentric circles, shapes inside shapes. Words. Symbols. A looping spiral with two names: **Chris and Mark**.

Emma stepped in.

"**Chris,"** she said.

He didn't look up. Just kept drawing.

"You always said you wanted to be a better father," she said. **"And I never doubted that. But you never believed in yourself. You let your fear decide for you. You gave it a name, made it a person. Then you blamed that person for everything."**

He finally looked up. Pale. Sunken eyes. But somewhat present.

"I don't know," he said**. "I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought—if I could escape myself, I wouldn't hurt anyone."**

"You were already hurting us," she said. **"The drugs didn't erase anything. They just made it harder to see what was left."**

He blinked slowly, then asked, **"How's Chris?"**

Emma froze.

"You mean Mark," she corrected.

Chris frowned. **"No. I meant..."**

Emma held the child closer. Her tone sharpened.

"You don't even know who you are anymore."

She turned away.

In a nearby observation room, two psychologist reviewed his file. Charts, scans, logs.

"Multiple overlapping delusions," said the older one. **"The most persistent being identity transference. First, the father becomes the son. Then the friend becomes the enemy. And in between, he invents personalities to carry what he can't."**

The younger doctor nodded. **"This is far beyond schizophrenia or bipolar fragmentation.** His psychedelic use seems to have cracked a deeper boundary; **he's experiencing recursive false memories. A confused identity patterns, I assume, through the diagnosis."**

They both watched Chris through the glass while discussing and noting his behavior of Chris.

"We believe the repeated ingestion of deliriants disrupted his thalamocortical network, causing him to misattribute core memories, projecting alternate versions of himself into imagined entities."

"**Mark,"** said the senior psychologist, **"may never have existed as he remembers. Or he did, but was absorbed into his ego, apparent ego dissolution. The differences are erased."**

They paused for a moment.

"And the child?" asked the younger psychologist.

"Well, Mrs. Emma Christopher insists their child's name is Mark."

That night, in **Room 43,** Chris slept with the lights on. The walls were covered in drawings with one spiral reached the ceiling. A shadow moved near the corner.

His eyes opened.

From the mirror, a voice whispered:

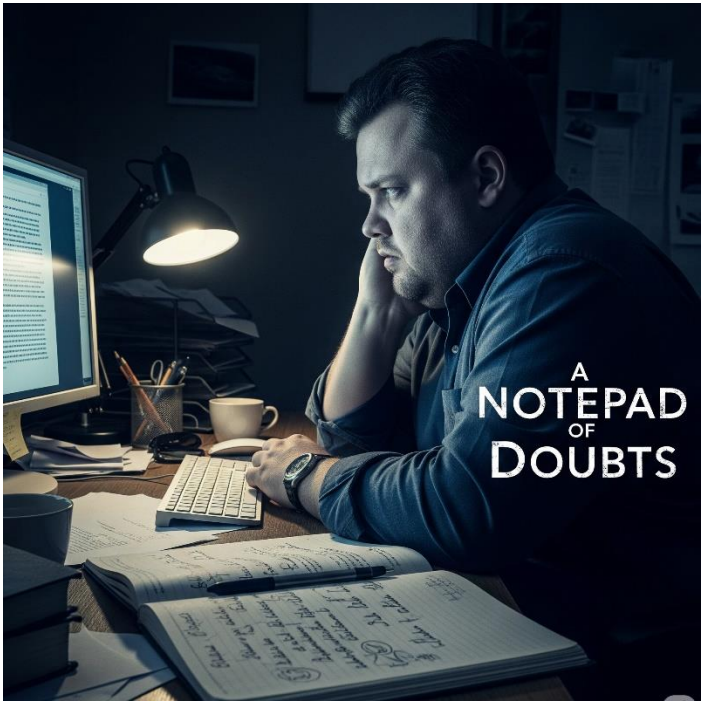
"You were never two. You were one, and then none."

Chris sat up, while the drawings started to warble as they changed. In every single drawing, the faces had blurred into each other. No one was clearly Mark. No one, clearly, Chris.

Emma sat by the hospital window at dawn, her son Mark sleeping in her arms, his hand twitching as if he were seeking for something. She looks at the trees outside, then back at her son. She whispers to her son. **"Please don't become him. Please don't split."**

Behind her, Room 43 remained silent. But the spiral on the wall kept growing. And somewhere inside it, a name was still being written letter by letter that only Chris can see as he is now trying to remember who was who. Struggling to become whole again.

A NOTEPAD OF DOUBTS



The light flickers. The computer screen hums back to life.

Tariq grabs a chipped mug, coffee already cold. He sips, then sits down. The notepad file remains opened, the cursor blinking

Tariq starts typing: "It's been months, and I can't make sense of it all. I've lost the drive to make art, trying my best to create something today, I really hope I get something out of the remaining creative tank in my head."

An hour slides by.

Tariq shifts between files in his **Digital Audio Workstation**, dragging in samples, layering textures, and deleting them just as fast. The room is otherwise quiet aside from the random click of a keyboard or the hum of a discarded synth. A strip of antidepressants lies close to the edge of the desk, unbroken.

He reopens the notepad:

"Nothing happened. All the inspiration is gone. I don't know what to do to protect my sanity anymore. I've watched every possible video on YouTube, hoping for something to click, but nothing resonates. Everything feels formulaic, the same dead philosophers quoted again and again, the same AI-generated videos flooding in. Some of them used to make sense, but no longer do. I tried flipping samples using a brand new VST sampler plugin, but nothing's working. I used to be able to write, but I've lost that confidence, too. And none of these stupid antidepressants are doing anything. It's a mess."

He stops. Walks to the window. Lights a cigarette. Sky's dull. Just stillness that doesn't offer anything.

He inhales. Holds. Exhales. Again. Tries grounding himself. A short walk follows. The outside is nothing remarkable. Still, it's a change of air. Back in his room, he sits down again, smokes another.

He types:

"What just happened? Why does this burden hurt like this? What is it even for? I can't tell anyone. I can't afford to look weak. I'm a man, how could I be this fragile? I have to fight through it, but how? Nothing makes sense anymore. Not spiritually. Not materialistically. Just a void. And if I speak up, they'll judge. I don't want their judgment, and I don't want their sympathy either."

He timestamps it: **July 28, 2025 – 3:47 AM.** The file saves. The screen darkens. His eyes close.

A voice cuts through.

It's sharp. Female. Then another sound, laughter that doesn't sound right. Someone's watching, maybe a version of himself. Not in a dream, not fully awake. He doesn't open his eyes.

Morning comes.

He dresses slowly. Leaves for work.

The walk stretches. The city moves around him like it's under water. Buildings seem like the ruins of urban decay. Every step is louder than it should be. His heart speeds. Sweat collects along his temples. Thoughts pile up and crack against each other. He turns around. Runs. Gets back to home. Takes the meds. Waits.

Later, in the office, he functions. Speaks when needed. Smiles. Answers emails. Handles tasks. No one suspects anything.

Back home, and Inside is mind, there's anxiety. He wants to write again. Make music. Do anything that feels like it belongs to him. Instead, he listens to others. Offers support. Avoids the mirror.

He walks home listening to metal, hoping it jolts something awake. It doesn't. He switches to ambient music, trying to dissolve. Still nothing. Another cigarette. Another blank file.

He types. Then erases. Then types again:

"I've filled pages over the years. All of them disappeared. I try to begin something, but for whom? And why now?"

Deletes again. Lights another cigarette.

Tries to slow his breathing. Feels the loop tightening.

The next day, he calls off half the shift. Goes to the park. Watches people sketch, walk, and smile. It helps for a moment. But the moment dies shortly after.

Back home, he clenches his fists. There's something rising. It wants to burst. But he stops it. Not because of fear, but because he knows there's no coming back from what might follow. If he damages someone else, he'll take the last of himself with it.

Another night. Another attempt. Nothing made.

The mental pressure grows. Language fails.

After a few months, his sister sits at Tariq's desk, reading through the logs and opening folders. Dozens of half-named tracks. Voice memos. Notes without context. Dots of something bigger that never connected. Some of it is uploaded online by his friends as quiet tributes to their lost friend. Most people are unaware of his presence, including his loved ones. He existed, but he's now gone, and no one knows about his current whereabouts.

Then, much later:

Somewhere, Tariq stands naked in front of the mirror. Looks at the parts of himself he never accepted. There's a metal soundtrack playing out loud, with a lot of random screams and overdriven brutal riffs. Now, it's Just him, his body, and a void that can only be replaced with noise. A noise that screams out loud, not the one that suffocate inside.

Meanwhile, his sister Farishta is searching for him. It took months. There are no clues, only unanswered calls and dead ends.

Tariq has drifted. In his mind, he's separated from everything that made him feel cornered. But what lies ahead is more chaos, and he doesn't see it coming.

Before he disappeared, he wrote in his notepad:

"I think I'm stuck. Sick of the old ways. Sick of being overlooked. It's about time I take control of my sanity before the void consumes me."

Tariq packs a few things. His computer, some clothes, and the note were still open on the screen.

Tariq found a place to be, but as he was approaching what he assumed was a destination, he met a bully. The pattern repeats. Same verbal insults, same body shaming, and the same dilemma. This time, Tariq snapped in the dark of a full moon-covered alley.

He picked up a brick and suddenly struck the bully with it, who fell to the ground. While the bully was down and nearly out, Tariq pulled a digital recorder from his bag and started recording his screams. As the fallen bully screamed, Tariq laughed, loud and hysterical, recording every second. Then the fear hit. The guilt returned. Tariq fled the scene before anyone could catch him.

Later.

On his iPad, Tariq made some noises. The threshold of compression was high, pumping the beat down to bring out the grit. He raised the gain on the overdrive to 75 percent. He sampled the bully's screams and let them play on a loop in the background.

He undressed, now standing in front of the mirror, examining a body far different from the one people saw online. No six-pack. The layer of fat was visible. The softness and dysmorphia were at an all-time high. Doubt crept in, quiet but steady, and he was alone with the gruesome sounds of random screams and overdriven brutal riffs.

Suddenly, the place began to shake. A quake set everything warbling. Tariq looked concerned. The panic attack and cold sweats surged through his naked, unfit body. Everything looked like a bulldozed wasteland. He tried to remember something, but chaos took over the moment. He found himself in a place where everyone was bowing to him. He felt like a king. It felt like redemption. It felt like he had done something remarkable, and now people knew who he was.

But the sound swells. It grows louder, relentless.

A voice cuts through.

“Tariq, where the hell are you?”

Everything went dark. He woke up trapped in his own thoughts, under the roof of the room where he spent most of his time.

The booming sound turned out to be a knock at the door, his worried sister, Farishta.

He replied, **“Wait.”**

His eyes catch the screen. The same unfinished note still blinking:

"I think I’m stuck. Sick of the old ways. Sick of being overlooked. It’s about time I take control of my sanity before the void consumes me."

He stands. Takes a deep breath. Swallows a tablet. Walks to the door.

He opens it.

No one is there.

THE OTHERS WHO ARE ALSO YOU

There is no protagonist, only the shapes of people. No plot, only feelings passing like shadows across walls.

At first, everything is quiet. The mind scans its surroundings with no particular focus, a steady hum underneath. Anxiety doesn't need volume to leave an impact; it repeats itself in loops, gradually wearing down reason.

The body stays in one place, but thoughts scatter across unfinished conversations, unspoken fears, and unanswered messages.

Fear works without language. It organizes escape routes and contingency plans. A changed tone, a sideways glance, even silence becomes data.

Everything is measured for threat, yet nothing makes sense.

The simplest moments become riddles: where to stand, what to say, how to leave before the room becomes too loud.

Mood swings arrive like shifts in the weather without a forecast.

Joy appears, sudden and bright, but disappears just as fast.

In this instability, sound enters.

A low, consistent hum stretches across the room like a ceiling. It doesn't draw attention; it reduces the noise inside. Slowly, the nervous system begins to mirror the rhythm.

Thought quiets after the beginning of ambient music.

People appear without being introduced.

A woman on a balcony, her eyes tracing something distant.

A young man in a parking lot, still, his headphones forming a wall.

A stranger in a café, both hands around a ceramic mug.

They aren't connected by place, but their expressions carry the familiar connections. They feel more like questions than characters.

No one speaks. The ambient sound around them does the translation. It cushions their minds, softening the corners of their deepest thoughts.

But tone changes.

Darkness doesn't arrive dramatically. It slips in. Red light begins to bleed into the frame of view. People's movements slow, their shapes are transforming. The calmness that held them begins to crossfade. Panic takes a new form, internal pressure of **"what might be"**, harder to explain for some. It's not panic that screams. It's the kind that lingers in the head, flattening the senses.

Even familiar kindness feels off.

A smile seems strategic.

A compliment triggers suspicion.

The brain flips its settings.

Somewhere beneath all this, a question rises: **If healing is real, why is pain always on time?**

The question doesn't demand an answer. It just stays there!

Then something subtle happens. The tone doesn't change, but its meaning does. What once sounded neutral now carries the artifacts of electroacoustic.

A steady breath. Light filters through blinds into an unkempt room.

Someone walks without checking their phone.

A meal cooks without urgency.

A person sits alone and feels okay, even if just for a minute.

Ambient music holds this space with grace.

Binaural beats begin working on the brain quietly.

Frequencies guide the hemispheres into alignment.

In a small, cluttered room, a man adjusts levels on a soundboard. Wires across the floor. Old notebooks were stacked near a flickering lamp. The track he's building is an attempt to make sense of everything inside out.

The file is titled **"Memory Collapse #5."**

Calm doesn't last.

Agitation sneaks back in after the interlude of peace. The agitation is not that dramatic by design, though! It's just enough to make someone feel off to leave a potential idea behind.

The sounds feel dull as every audible echo of it drones without transitions; now it's really irritating.

Mood drops its temperature to dead cold Celsius.

The man removes his headphones and stares at the soundboard.

The same knobs that once felt like instruments of peace now feel foreign, and uninspiring.

Elsewhere, a couple shares a moment. Their bodies close, sensing the warmth, following with a kiss that slows everything down. Chemicals surge. Their world feels quiet, yet the emotions are running wild.

A few blocks away, a man watches that couple from the alley. He isn't angry. Just curious about the passionate affection. A moment later, he walks away, still wondering what makes some people easier to love, while some stay defected with emptiness, awaiting their moment of intimacy with someone special.

In a different part of the city, a woman closes her curtains. She hasn't spoken to anyone in three days. Meanwhile, a young man consistently posting online haunted by the fear of missing out.

These are the stories that aren't the same, but these feelings overlap, somehow. And loud cities are built by the quiet stories of the people with their own ways of citing emotions.

The same emotions that travel without passports.

Loneliness circulates, so does joy, so does numbness.

Someone dances alone. Someone breaks down in traffic.

A day begins with optimism and ends in silence.

A morning aches, but an evening glows.

Nothing guarantees anything.

Strangers help sometimes. Other times, they’re a reminder of what’s missing. Even love doesn't always rescue. There are no fixed roles here. Only states.

Ambient music flows again. But now it's become part of the ordinary.

Shoes scraping the floor.

A match is lit.

A dog shaking its collar.

These sounds enter the same emotional layer as melody. The brain accepts them as part of the score composed by the circumstances.

The time rolls backward.

A **CD** spins in a teenager's bedroom. **MS Paint** drawings save to floppy disks. Internet cafes echo with keyboards and waiting screens. Everything loads slowly. Everything is tactile.

Years later, streaming replaces waiting. Screens follow people everywhere. Connections multiply, but the silence between responses stretches longer. Music becomes private again, but this time curated by the algorithms of streaming services.

The same people grow older. Some become more open. Others close off. Some stay in therapy. Some disappear.

Days arrive. Evenings carry heaviness.

Nights ask questions.

A person walks by a tree and feels grounded. Another deletes a message they almost sent. A third stares at traffic and finds it calming.

Maybe divinity isn't in heaven or hell. Maybe it's a pattern repeating in nature in the form of audible art, accompanied by the visible emotions painted with different colors.

The hum continues.

The people reappear.

The couple, with intimacy, is now distant. The watcher from the alley is no longer watching. He is inside, laughing. The ambient producer returns to his soundboard console. The lonely woman texts a stranger who replies.

Nothing is permanent. But nothing is entirely lost either.

And through all of it, the sound persists.

It doesn't resolve. It holds.

And that's enough.

A ROAR OF SILENCE

Deboo Khan, a lanky boy with wild hair and a guitar slung across his back, once believed music was salvation. Born in Kolachi's chaotic streets, he grew up in a world of conflicting ideals, but music gave him much-needed clarity.

He spent nights in his modest apartment, stringing the power chords that spoke of love, rebellion, and the streets that raised him.

His passion burned bright enough to land him a coveted spot in Kolachi's burgeoning rock scene.

For a while, life seemed perfect.

The industry welcomed him with open arms, charmed by his raw authenticity. Deboo released a debut album that topped the local charts. He performed sold-out concerts, luxuriating in the adoration of a crowd that screamed back his sung words.

Cameras recorded his every step, interviews highlighted his **"meteoric rise,"** and admirers competed for his attention.

But behind the glamour, Deboo saw cracks.

His manager frequently reminded him, **“It’s all about staying relevant.”**

The label demanded catchy hooks instead of the raw and grunge riffs he was once known for.

They plastered him in clothes that felt foreign, sculpting him into a marketable product.

His songs were rewritten to fit the criteria of the new sub-standards, and slowly, his music became a hollow echo of what it once was.

At first, he justified it. **“I’m reaching more people,”** he told himself.

But the whispers behind closed doors grew louder.

The same industry that celebrated him also mocked him.

"He's too raw," they'd say. **"Too difficult to mold."**

Gossip about his integrity spread, undercutting his success.

One evening, following a glitzy awards ceremony, Deboo sat by himself in his apartment and gazed at his guitar.

The music was rough and unrefined as he strummed a few notes.

The kind of music he used to make.

But when he recorded and shared it online, the response was brutal. **"Washed up,"** they called him. **"Clinging to his glory days."**

Frustrated, Deboo decided to return to his roots.

He quit the industry, determined to play indie shows, opening for other big guns at the time.

He found solace in performing at occasional events at local venues.

But the crowds were sparse, their applause lukewarm.

They wanted the polished pop magnum, not the unfiltered rock star.

His savings dwindled, and Deboo faced a stark choice: conform or starve.

Hopelessly, he crept back into the industry.

Months of rejection followed until one producer, a shadowy figure named Rizwan, took him in.

Rizwan saw potential, but his vision mirrored the industry's worst aspects.

"Forget who you were. We'll make you a star again."

Reluctantly, Deboo agreed.

He was repackaged, his authenticity stripped layer by layer.

The cycle of manipulation is repeated.

The same people who celebrated his return now whispered again.

This time, Deboo couldn't take it.

During a late-night recording session, Rizwan demanded yet another rewrite of Deboo's lyrics.

“It needs to be trendier,” Rizwan said.

Deboo, exhausted and disillusioned, stood in the center of the studio. The polished floors, the blinding lights, and the false smiles suffocated him. Deboo grabbed his electric guitar and slammed it against the amp without warning.

There was a startled stillness in the room as the sound shrieked like thunder. He saw the astonished, frightened, and even amused faces around him.

“This is a joke,” Deboo said, his voice trembling. **“All of this… you, me, this industry.”**

He stormed out, leaving behind a shattered guitar, a broken amp, and a room full of silent manipulators. Outside, the Kolachi night was as noisy as the screeching guitar feedback.

Daboo’s thought of making music faded into the chaos of a world that never cared to listen.

LAUGHING TREE

The clown hit the ground hard while the pavement tore his skin, but he felt nothing. An armed man has vanished into the crowd, but the child is safe now as his feet wobbled toward the crowd after being saved by the clown.

The world lost focus to random faces, sirens, light.

Everything dimmed like the final blink of a dying bulb.

Clown's breath came in short bursts.

Sharp memories stabbed the dying clown's mind with the children's laughter around balloon shapes, a woman calling his name, and motel rooms where paint washed off.

Suddenly, the darkness took over.

Not the kind behind closed eyes.

Just void.

Then a dot appeared.

So small it could have been false.
It grew wide, spreading like ink.

It pulled him in, not his body, something else.

"You're dead," said the light.

Not with sound. With presence.

The clown tried to laugh.

No sound came.
"So... that's it? Heaven? Hell? Limbo?"

"None of those," said the light.
"You'll go back."

"Reincarnation? Like that Indian thing?" clown asked.
The word felt foreign on his tongue.

The light pulsed.

"All of them got some parts. None saw the absolute."

Movement began. Or the void moved. He couldn't tell.

"What's the point? I'll forget again. It'll vanish like smoke. So what?"

"It all counts," said the light. Still. Clear.

"Every good, every harm, every second shapes what comes next. You forget now. You remember later. You are every life."

He tried to protest. He wanted facts, not riddles.

The light expanded. Thought unraveled.

"Why?" clown asked.

"The universe offers no prize. No punishment. Only understanding, it depends on how you perceive it"

Then there was only the light, which slowly faded to the point of nothingness.

It started in quiet, far back in the depths of the earth's cracks. One seed struggled in the darkness beneath the ash, sheltered by the rubble of what was lost. The sun, its brightness lost to a dullness, a fatigue, drifted in the environment like a dark shade of what used to be. The seed opened, forcing out a weak sprout upwards, its first breath shuddering with the force of rebirth.

The wind smelled of dust and tears, but the sprout pushed through. It stretched, reaching towards the faint light, sipping on the failing energy of the sun's dying embers.

Microbes swirled around it in the wet soil, ancient words coalescing into something new.

The rain came, sparse and hesitant, it’s pouring gentle against the sprout's new leaves. It became aware—a foreign, thrilling sensation of being, tiny but boundless in its own smallness. Years dissolved into centuries.

The sprout matured to a sapling, and the sapling to a tree.

The world changed, ferns opened, grasses swayed, and flowers showed bright colors on the ground, each one like a careful mark.

The tree stood still and noticed. Its roots pulled food from the soil.

Its branches reached up toward the light.

Then new ones came. They called themselves human.

The tree watched their colors, their movements, and their way of living. Birds sang above. Butterflies spun through the air.

Humans built their lives under the tree's wide cover.

The tree watched their emotions unfold, laughter that echoed like wind chimes, tears that dropped with the stillness of dew.

It saw joy in their painting, their motion, their connection.

It also saw rage, grief, and a drive that pushed them forward without pause. The tree gave its own quiet smile, its leaves catching light in the hush of this strange and precise life.

Then the shape of beauty shifted. The form fell out of place.

The tree observed as axes were brought down on its brethren.

The sound of wood cracking filled the forest as trees toppled, one after another, their roots cut and their lifeblood spilled.

The tree wept, its leaves dropping onto the soil in grief.

The ground that once fed it lay dark with the ash of fallen kin.

One day, it saw something different—a person in loud, glaring clothes. A clown, his face stretched with false smiles, ran toward the tree. Behind him, loud voices shouted, throwing insults with each word. He tripped and hit the ground, their laughter cutting the atmosphere with sharp edges.

He sprang up and pressed himself to the tree, breath broken into rough bursts. The tree felt his dread, his disgrace. The clown's painted smile peeled under the weight of ridicule. The tree enshrouded him in its shadow, its branches moving softly as if to soothe him.

"I would have said I know your pain. I have witnessed devastation, too. I have known the pain of loss."

But it could only hold him in lasting muteness. While the clown sat under the tree, his shoulders shook.

The tree longed for something new: the power to speak. To tell the clown that life held cruelty and wonder in equal form.

To show that ruin sometimes gives way to form.

But the tree made no sound.

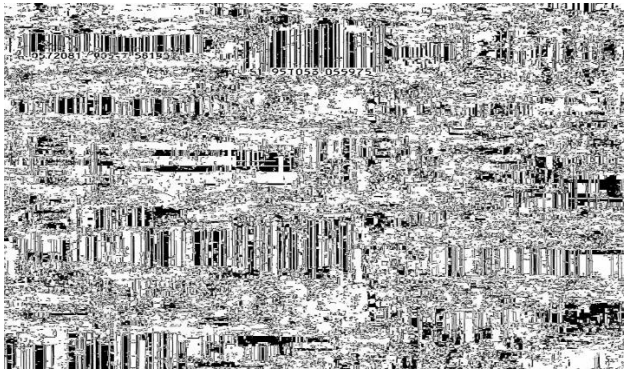
It stood still, giving shade, holding space, storing knowledge deep inside its rings. The clown sat quiet, then looked up at the sky.

The loud voices faded far from reach.

He lifted his hand and pressed it to the bark, pulling strength from the surface.

Although the tree could not smile, it sensed the faintest spark of hope—**the kind born of ashes.**

Life was cruel, yes. But it was also unyielding.



THE END